Beckwith

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A

DISSUASIVE FROM CONTROVERSY

RESPECTING

THE MODE OF BAPTISM.

Second edition.

BY G. C. BECKWITH

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EXPLANATORY NOTICE.

Discussions introduced among my people respecting the mode of baptism, had so far engrossed their minds as to check for a time a prosperous revival of religion, and threaten ere long its total extinction. To prevent this catastrophe, I dissuaded them from agitating such a controversy, and urged them to turn their attention to subjects of more vital importance than the mere form of a ceremony. The dissuasive was successful; and the blessing of God on a very humble effort gave a new and lasting impulse to the revival. At the request of my church, the discourse was published solely for my own people; but the unexpected demand for it by the public has induced me to revise it somewhat, with the hope of rendering a second edition better adapted to general use. I have chosen, however, to retain its original plainness of speech, and familiarity of style. Its title explains its whole design; for it is solely a dissuasive from *controversy* respecting the mode of baptism. I plead only for peace; I decline dispute on such a subject; I leave all in the quiet possession of their own views; and sorry indeed should I be, if any expression should be misconstrued into the least wish to interfere with the faith or practice of my brethren in Christ.

G. C. B.

Lowell, October, 1828.

SERMON.

John 4:24.

GOD IS A SPIRIT; AND THEY THAT WORSHIP HIM, MUST WORSHIP HIM IN SPIRIT AND IN TRUTH.

WORSHIP is an act by which a creature expresses to God his desires and obligations. It is the communion of a soul with its Maker; and all the variety of its sensible forms is designed merely to assist us in carrying on this spiritual intercourse, and to make on others such an impression as will lead them to glorify our Father in heaven. Modes are only the costume of worship, the mere drapery of devotion. Its nature is spiritual; it springs from the heart; it is a communion of mind with mind, the intercourse of a created spirit with the Father of spirits. The mind is the man; and God requires the heart because it is the source and criterion of our actions. If the heart is wrong, all is wrong; but if the heart is right, we may hope, whatever the form of our services, to meet the acceptance of him who looketh on the heart, and commands us to worship him in spirit and in truth.

A few examples will shew us how much depends on the mere mode of our worship. While performing religious services at the table, one man kneels, another sits,

and a third stands. Which of these modes is essential? Can we not be grateful in one as well as another of these positions? Some stand, while others kneel around the domestic altar. But is it material in which of these postures we pray? Because I am accustomed to kneel, shall I presume that those who stand while leading the devotions of the family, render no acceptable homage to God? Whatever the form or the posture of our worship, will not our devout aspirations be accepted by the Searcher of hearts?

Public worship has been performed in a great diversity of ways. Every age, every country, and every church has adopted a mode peculiar in some respects to itself. The saints of old worshipped God by presenting a variety of sacrifices and offerings; but we bring to the altar no offering but ourselves, and no sacrifice but that of penitent, believing and obedient hearts. By deviating so widely from their modes of worship, have we lost the spirit of devotion? Or shall we say, that patriarchs and prophets were not acceptable worshippers of God? No; they were right, and we are right. Their circumstances were so unlike ours as to require a mode of worship very different from that which is best adapted to our circumstances. Their mode was the best for them; ours is the best for us; and both equally acceptable to God. We do not servilely imitate them; but we endeavour to catch the spirit of their example by conforming to our circumstances as they conformed to theirs.

The Lord's supper is a most solemn and delightful act of worship. But is any particular mode indispensably necessary to render a sincere and devout celebration of it acceptable to God? How far do we in this ordinance imitate the example of Christ? We know

very well how he celebrated it. He met his disciples by night, in an upper room; they were alone; he washed their feet; he used unleavened bread, and a kind of wine very different from any that we can procure; and these emblems of atoning blood were partaken by them while reclining on couches, in accordance with eastern custom, on their left elbow around a table raised a few inches from the floor. Is there a church on earth that imitates Christ in all or any one of these particulars? Do you deem it necessary or even desirable? Put it to the test of actual experiment. Let a church celebrate the Lord's supper by night, and in an upper room; let them exclude all spectators; let them use only unleavened bread; let them send to Judea for the very kind of wine that Christ used; let them wash one another's feet; let them receive the sacred emblems while reclining upon mats or couches spread on the floor. Would such a mode of celebrating it be in our circumstances more acceptable to God, more conducive to our spiritual improvement, or better adapted to command the respect of candid and intelligent men, than any of the simpler modes adopted by modern churches?

But Christ, after celebrating the sacramental supper, commanded his followers in every age to do the same in remembrance of him. How then can you, with a clear conscience, disregard a command so plain and positive? —"You think that Christ did not intend to enjoin an exact literal imitation of his example."—But there it is in the Bible plain as noon-day. How then do you know that he does not mean just what he says? Where has he given you license to suppose that he says one thing, but really means another?—"You think he *could* not mean a literal imitation."— Why not? "The thing

speaks for itself; such a mode of celebrating the Lord's supper would most obviously be in our circumstances improper and even indecorous. What! recline on the floor! wash one another's feet! a whole church too of a thousand members! Common sense must see, and common delicacy feel, the impropriety of such a mode." —But Christ celebrated the supper in this way; and would he do any thing improper?—"No; it was proper for him."—But if proper for him, why not for us?—"His circumstances were very different from ours; and what is perfectly proper according to the customs of one country, may be very improper according to the customs of another. Eastern nations have, from time immemorial, taken their food in a reclining posture, and without knife, fork, or spoon. Christ did so with perfect propriety. But would it, according to the customs of our country, be proper for us? The disciples, while partaking of the bread and wine, reclined upon couches, because that was the posture in which they were wont to take their daily food. We catch the spirit of Christ's example by conforming to our circumstances as he conformed to those in which he was placed."—But, while departing from the letter of his command, how can you be sure of catching its real spirit?—"We know the ultimate design of the Lord's supper. It is to promote our growth in grace by commemorating his death; and if this object is gained, we deem it of little consequence in what place, or at what hour of the day, it is celebrated; how much or how little bread and wine is taken; or whether these symbols of redeeming love are received in a sitting, kneeling, or reclining posture. We feel at liberty to adopt that mode which seems in our circumstances best adapted to accomplish the high and holy purposes of this ordinance.

The form without the spirit is nothing. It is its meaning that gives a ceremony all its value; and if one mode of administering the Lord's supper means the same thing and accomplishes the same purposes with another mode, we consider it quite immaterial in which of these ways it is celebrated."

Every one must see the justness of this reasoning. But will it not apply as fairly and forcibly to baptism as to the Lord's supper? The former is as truly an act of worship as the latter; and he who, in either of these ordinances, worships God in spirit and in truth, will be accepted of him who looketh on the heart. They are also similar in principle, design, and tendency. Both are merely symbols that speak through our senses to our souls. Their value is measured by their moral influence; and this influence results from their signification. One commemorates what Christ has done, and the other what the Holy Spirit does, in the great work of redeeming a fallen world from the power and penalties of sin. Baptism, like its kindred ordinance, is a means of holiness, and designed to produce a salutary impression both on the Christian and on men of the world. The mode is in both cases only a means for the attainment of this end. Why then should we not select the means best adapted to secure this end? In one case we do; and why not in the other? The Lord's supper is celebrated by all Christians in the way which seems in their circumstances most likely to accomplish its spiritual purposes. Why then should we not administer baptism in that mode which may be in our circumstances best adapted to secure the object of this holy ordinance?

I have myself been accustomed to reason in the same way respecting both ordinances. The Bible treats them

both alike, and I would treat them as the Bible does. If a christian, receiving any kind or quantity of bread and wine in any way whatever from a minister of the gospel in commemoration of his Saviour's death, really celebrates the sacramental supper; I suppose, on the same principle, that a person to whom water is, in any mode whatever, applied by a christian minister in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, is truly and properly baptized. To each ordinance the mode bears the same relation. I am left, in one case as truly as in the other, to conform to my circumstances, and follow the dictates of expediency. If I may choose the mode of one ordinance, I may choose that of the other. If I ought to celebrate the Lord's supper in the way best fitted to accomplish its spiritual purposes, I feel not only at liberty, but sacredly bound to adopt that mode of applying water in baptism which is best suited to my circumstances, and most accordant with the nature and design of this holy ordinance.

Now, by what principles are you guided in choosing a particular mode of celebrating the Lord's supper? You consider your circumstances; and then select that mode which seems to you the most simple, the most convenient, the most congenial with the customs of society around you, the most accordant with the genius of Christianity, and the most likely in your circumstances to secure the spiritual purposes for which this sacred rite was instituted.

But why should we not proceed on the same principles in selecting a particular mode of baptism? Are these qualities more desirable in one ordinance than in the other? Ought not the manner of applying water in baptism, as well as the manner of receiving bread and

wine at the Lord's supper, to be simple, convenient, congenial with the customs of society, accordant with the spirit of our religion, and fitted to accomplish its holy purposes? If you ask me then what mode of baptism I would recommend, I should reply by barely repeating your own principles, and specifying those qualities which ought in your view to characterize our mode of celebrating the Lord's supper.*

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* MODE OF BAPTISM. The principles I have suggested might be briefly illustrated and applied by saying, that the mode of baptism, like that of the Lord's supper, ought to be

1. *Simple.* As a handmaid to Christianity, its livery should correspond with the characteristic simplicity of the gospel. Ceremonies are only the costume of religion; modes are only the costume of a ceremony; and Christianity, destined to become the religion of all mankind, must wear a drapery which she can change in adaptation to the ever-shifting circumstances in which her votaries may be placed.

2. *Adapted to meet the actual wants of Christianity.* It should conform to the age, country and climate in which we live. It should be such, that all proper subjects may receive the ordinance with safety; and for this purpose it must be adapted to the sick, and to persons in the coldest climates, in all seasons of the year, and in every possible variety of circumstances.

3. *Congenial especially with the customs of society.* The mode of the Lord's supper, conforming itself to these customs, has at length lost among us *all* those peculiarities which distinguished the manner of its first celebration by Christ and his Apostles. But, were we natives of Judea, we might, in conformity to eastern customs, very properly imitate their example, and receive the bread and wine while reclining, as they did, on mats spread upon the floor. Were we in a country, like that of Palestine, where bathing was common among persons of every rank and both sexes, we might prefer to baptize by immersion; but in such countries as most of those which lie in the frigid and temperate zones, where bathing is not common, and might be deemed rather indelicate for a large portion of the community, might not propriety lead us to choose a mode more congenial with the customs of society around us?

4. *Convenient.* Such a mode as would require no change of garments either for the minister or the subject, no bustle of preparation, and the least interruption in the ordinary worship of the sanctuary, would seem preferable on the ground of convenience.

5. *Decorous.* We are commanded to "do all things decently;" and we ought, therefore, to choose a mode free from every objection on the ground of strict propriety and decorum. It should offer no offence to the most refined feelings, or the most sensitive and shrinking delicacy. It should be liable to occasion no suspicious smile, no ludicrous or licentious remarks, no train of unhallowed associations among a crowd of irreligious and perhaps unprincipled spectators.

What room can we now find for dispute on this point? On every ground, except that of expediency, is not the mode of baptism, as truly as that of the Lord's supper, a matter of entire indifference? Is it not altogether unworthy of dispute? Why then should we be anxious to persuade others that ours is the only, or even the best mode of baptism? No; let us leave every one to choose his own mode, and ask in return only the privilege of being left to enjoy ours in peace. We prefer, in celebrating the Lord's supper, to partake the bread and wine while occupying our usual seats in the sanctuary; but should my church deem it expedient to receive those memorials of a Saviour's love from a table or an altar, I would most cheerfully administer them in either of these ways. Should they find any other mode of baptism better adapted than their present one to persons in every climate, in all seasons, and all circumstances; less injurious to health; more convenient and decorous; less liable to be abused by an irreligious world, and fitted to produce a more solemn and salutary impression, I would surely urge them to adopt that mode. But why

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6. *Fitted above all to secure the ultimate object of baptism.* That object is to produce both on the subject and the spectators such an impression as will subserve the interests of religion. The ordinance, in whatever way administered, may exert in some degree an influence of this kind; but let the mode be such as I have described, and I can imagine few scenes more impressive than the administration of it amid the breathless silence of a full and solemn sanctuary. It is in the house of God. It is before the assembly of his people. It is amid the awful solemnities of his worship. All is still; all is solemn; every ear is open; every eye is fixed; and heaven and earth seem pausing for a moment to witness the spectacle of a creature solemnly consecrated to the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. Never did I see the ordinance properly administered in this way without producing on the whole audience an impression apparently solemn and useful. But the candidate receives a still better impression. His thoughts collected, his feelings unruffled, his bosom agitated by no shrinking fears, no shivering or suffocating sensations, he can catch the spirit of the ordinance, and indulge in calm, appropriate and delightful reflections.

not leave the whole matter to every man's unbiassed choice? Why dispute about the mode of baptism any more than about the mode of the Lord's supper? Why spend so much time, thought and zeal on the mere form of a ceremony? Why make it every day a topic of controversial conversation? I regret that it has become such a matter of dispute among christians; for I could wish that all had been left to choose and enjoy without molestation their own mode of baptism just as they have their respective modes of celebrating the Lord's supper. I cannot express the reluctance I feel in approaching a subject which has occasioned so many unpleasant feelings among brethren. To avoid or allay these feelings, I would most cheerfully sacrifice any thing but the cause of Christ, and the salvation of souls. You will bear me witness, that I never even allude to it, except in answer to the private inquiries of individuals who wish for particular instruction on the subject; and I approach it now only for the purpose of suggesting *some reasons to dissuade you from dwelling so much on the mere mode of baptism.*

I. THE POINT IN DISPUTE SEEMS NOT TO DESERVE ALL THIS ATTENTION.

Will the *importance even of baptism itself* justify so much and so vehement contention among brethren? Far be it from me to undervalue this ordinance, or any other that God has appointed and enjoined for our benefit. But what is its real value? It is only a ceremony; a symbol designed to represent to our senses, and thus impress more deeply on our minds, certain truths of the Bible. But, independently of these truths, what moral influence can it exert? Does it teach any *new* truth? And are not the very ideas which it suggests taught in a great variety of ways by the sacred writers? Baptism,

then, is only a shadow whose substance is to be found in the instructions of the Bible and the living preacher. While in full possession of the substance, shall I contend for its shadow? Why? Can it save a man? Will any one be excluded from heaven barely on account of his not having been baptized? Baptism has, indeed, its share of importance; but how trivial when compared with those doctrines which display the character of God, convert the sinner, and sanctify the saint! With the treasures of India before me then, shall I stop to contend for a farthing? Shall I act as if all the truths of the gospel, all the interests of Christianity were condensed into one of its ceremonies? Shall I plead for baptism as earnestly as if the glory of God, the prosperity of religion, and the salvation of a world were staked upon it?

But is not the *mode* of baptism far less important than the ordinance itself? The mode is only its drapery. But is a man's dress as important as the man himself? Is the manner of taking our food as essential as the food itself? It is obvious that the mode, being only the costume of a ceremony, may vary without materially affecting the ceremony itself. Does a man change with the fashion of his coat? Eating is a universal custom; but food is taken by different nations in an endless diversity of ways. The Lord's supper has been celebrated in various ways; but amid all this variety of modes, the ordinance itself has remained essentially the same. Why then attach so much importance to the mere *mode* of baptism? The ceremony is itself only a shadow. Why cling to the shade of this shadow as if it were the sheet-anchor of the gospel? If my brother catches the spirit of this ordinance, shall I dispute with him about the mode? No; he has the wheat, and the chaff may go to the winds.

But let us inquire how nearly Christians are agreed respecting even the *mode* of baptism. If they all believed, that in celebrating the Lord's supper, bread and wine are to be used; that these emblems are to be administered by a minister of the gospel, and received by Christians in obedience to the command of Christ to commemorate his dying love; should we not suppose them to be essentially agreed respecting the *mode* of this ordinance? But are not Christians agreed on even more points concerning the mode of baptism? All believe, that water is to be used—that it must be applied by a christian minister—that it must be administered in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost—that all this must be done professedly in obedience to the command of Christ, and for the purposes of this holy ordinance. Agreeing in all these five particulars, in what can they differ? Only in the quantity of water to be used.

But let us see how nearly they agree even on this solitary point. Baptism has been administered in three ways—by immersion, affusion and sprinkling; and the only difference I can see between these modes is, that one brings water in contact with a larger portion of the surface of the human body than another. Neither of them brings it in contact with the *whole* surface; for the sudden plunge of a man into the water with all his clothes on him can ordinarily wet only a part of his body. Affusion wets perhaps four times, and immersion probably ten times as much of the body as baptism by sprinkling.

Is this, then, the amount of all the difference between Christians on the subject of baptism? And shall we magnify such a mole hill into a mountain of separation between those who love the Saviour with equal sincerity

and truth? Has such a point ever been suffered to divide the family of Christ, to alienate their hearts, and embitter their feelings against one another? Shall I stoop from the high themes of the gospel to preach from sabbath to sabbath on such a topic, and urge you to converse upon it morning, noon and night, with every one you meet?

II. BUT THERE IS REALLY NO NEED OF THIS CONTROVERSY. If necessary, for what end is it so? Is it necessary to enforce the practice of baptism itself, to accomplish its spiritual purposes, or to promote the vital interests of religion? Has God, by his manner of treating the subject in his word or providence, shown it to be one of those points for which we are required to contend earnestly? The answer to these questions is obvious, and evinces how little necessity there is for so much dispute among Christians respecting the mode of baptism.

Is it necessary, then, in order to *enforce on Christians the duty of baptism?* No; for on this point there is no difference of opinion or practice. They *all* practise baptism. Every church makes it a prerequisite to the enjoyment of its privileges. As the apostles commanded men to believe and be baptized, so do the missionaries of every denomination require converts from paganism to be baptized in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost.

But do you say, that those who baptize infants, do not make baptism a prerequisite to membership in their churches? You may not see how the baptism of a man in his infancy, instead of his being baptized at the time of making a public profession of his faith, can be "the answer of a good conscience toward God;" but many believe in the propriety of such a substitution,

and to *them* infant baptism is as truly the answer of a good conscience toward God, as adult baptism is to you.* Can you then suppose, that such Christians reject the ordinance of baptism itself? You think, that none but penitent believers in Christ can consistently partake of the Lord's supper; but some churches admit persons to this holy ordinance without requiring of them any evidence of their having been born again. Would you then say, that such churches altogether discard the Lord's supper itself from their faith and their practice?

But some of your brethren in Christ prefer a *mode* of baptism slightly different from yours. Now, because they use in baptism a little more or a little less water

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* I. Such a substitutiou of infant for adult baptism seems to them possible. Infant circumcision superseded the necessity of adult circumcision; and why may not the baptism of a child supersede the necessity of his being baptized on his coming to years of maturity?

II. Infant baptism has the same spiritual import, and answers essentially the same practical purposes, with adult baptism. It is a badge of Christianity; it is a public vow; it is an act of solemn consecrationto God; it recognizes the most important obligations of religion; it suggests and impresses the most practical truths of the gospel; and it tends to promote, as its ultimate object, the holiness and salvation of mankind. How much more can adult baptism mean or accomplish.

III. Take some illustrations from social life. If a man sells a farm of mine, and executes a deed, must I draw a new deed? Would it not be sufficient for me to acknowledge the old one by subscribing my name? A man bequeaths a large estate to the infant children of his friend on condition, that the parent shall oblige them, on arriving at maturity, to sign a certain instrument. To secure the legacy, the parent draws the instrument, and engages that his children shall either sign it themselves at the time required, or forfeit the estate. Would it not be sufficient for the children, at the time specified in the will, to ratify the act of their parent by signing the instrument which he had drawn for them? Must they draw another? On the same principle, the baptism of a person in his infancy need not be repented at the time of making a public profession of his faith. Though at first an act of his parent alone, he now acknowledges it as his own, and thus secures all that could be accomplished by repeating his baptism.—Thus do *all* churches make baptism a prerequisite to the enjoyment of their privileges by requiring, that their members should either have been baptized in their infancy, or receive this ordinance at the time of publicly professing their faith in Christ.

than you do, will you venture to charge them with rejecting the ordinance itself? Just apply this reasoning to a similar ceremony. My brother, in celebrating the Lord's supper, takes ten times less, or ten times more bread and wine than I do; and merely because he chooses not to take just as much, and no more of those sacred elements than I do, I presume to say he does not celebrate the Lord's supper, and I cannot have fellowship with him. He seems indeed to be a Christian, and I will commune with him in spirit; but his is really no celebration of the Lord's supper, and I cannot conscientiously have fellowship with one so irregular. It is a matter of conscience; and I must rid my garments of his blood by persuading him to celebrate this christian passover exactly in my way.*

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* *Close Communion.* It ought, in truth and candour, to be stated, that close communion results necessarily from the views conscientiously entertained by some respecting the mode of baptism. All churches require baptism; one class of christians, comprising a very small part of the christian world, deem not only baptism itself essential, but a particular mode of applying water in this ordinance; and the only question is, whether so much importance ought to be attached to the bare mode, or even to the ceremony itself

I wish to leave all in the unmolested enjoyment of their views; but to those whose minds are not yet settled on this subject, I would suggest a few hints which may help them to a right conclusion.

I. Be sure that you really desire to know and do whatever may be the will of God.

II. Take sufficient time and pains to ascertain his will. Wait, if necessary, for inquiry, for information, and for cool and cautious reflection.

III. Examine the subject in your best state of feeling—at a time when your soul is filled with the most heavenly views, and your bosom is glowing with the warmest love to your Saviour, and your christian brethren.

IV. Decide the question as you might suppose the best Christians would. How do missionaries, the noblest spirits of the church, feel and act on this subject? If the saints of old were now on earth, would prophets, apostles and martyrs refuse to commune with those who bear the image of their Lord, merely because they did not celebrate the sacramental supper, or had not been baptized in a particular way?

V. Inquire how your best feelings would lead you to act. Does God require any thing contrary to your best feelings?

Nor is this controversy respecting the mode of baptism necessary *for accomplishing the spiritual purposes of the ordinance.* What is its real ultimate object? It is to promote the holiness of men by impressing on their minds certain truths of the gospel. But may not these truths be suggested, and this object gained, by any mode whatever?

Look, for a moment, at the general nature of ceremonies. The custom of friendly and respectful salutation prevails among all nations; but how widely diversified are their modes of expressing this interchange of social feeling! In one country they shake hands; in another they embrace each other; in a third they prostrate themselves on the ground. Nearly all nations have been accustomed to declare war before commencing hostilities,—the Romans by throwing a javelin into the enemy's territory; Europeans by publishing in a manifesto a statement of their provocations along with the disclosure of their hostile purposes; and the savages of America by staining their faces with red, and raising their terrible war-whoop. But does not the ceremony, in all these cases, mean the same thing? Is it not possible then for the *mode* of baptism to vary while

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VI. Take that course which has the strongest tendency to promote your growth in holiness. This is the ultimate object of all the ordinances of the gospel, and all the means of grace.

VII. Endeavour to act as you will probably wish you had done when you come to meet your brethren of every name in heaven, and there unite forever in the song of Moses and the Lamb.

VIII. How would your Saviour act in your circumstances? Would he commune with any Christians who had been baptised by sprinkling or affusion? Does he actually commune with them in spirit? Does he then require "you to receive one another even as he hath received you?" But resolve, whatever their views on this subject, to treat with fraternal kindness all who "love our Lord Jesus Christ in sincerity and truth."

the ordinance itself retains the same meaning, and accomplishes the same purposes?

Christians have adopted various modes of administering this ordinance; but whatever their mode, have they not meant by it essentially the same thing? It is, in the view of all, the rite by which persons are admitted to the privileges of a christian church. It is the characteristic badge of Christianity. It is an act by which the Christian publicly consecrates himself, all that he has, and all that he can do, to the service and glory of the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. It is a vow by which he solemnly promises obedience to the commands of God. It is designed to recall and impress many truths of the gospel. Especially does it point to the necessity of our being born again, and commemorate the great work of the Holy Spirit in renewing and sanctifying the hearts of men. Baptism, whatever the mode, may mean all this; and can any mode mean more than this?*

But what gives a ceremony all its value? Not the mode, but the meaning; not the sign alone, but the thing which it signifies. Bread and wine are often taken in every possible variety of ways without the least thought of him who shed his blood on the cross for our redemption. Is then the mere *act* of taking bread and wine a celebration of the Lord's supper? Water is often

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* Is it said that neither sprinkling nor affusion can mean a death and burial? Very true. But what does "a death and burial" mean?—That we should die unto sin, and rise again to a life of new and holy obedience. But does not baptism, whatever the mode, mean this very thing? Do you, however, say that only one mode of baptism can represent the burial of Christ? But was baptism *designed* to represent this? Does the Bible tell you so? We have one ordinance to remind us of what Christ has done for our salvation. Why then turn baptism from its main design of commemorating what the Spirit does in the great work of redeeming mankind?

applied to the body in all possible ways without any religious import whatever. Does the mere application of water constitute christian baptism? No; it must have a meaning. Devoid of this, it would be as useless as a body without a soul. All its utility consists in its influence on the mind; and this influence results from its meaning. If then one way of administering this ordinance signifies the same thing with another, what object can be gained by one mode, that may not be substantially gained by another?

Why then should Christians dispute on a point so unessential? If my brother means and accomplishes by his mode just as much as I do by mine, why should I contend with him about the mode of this ordinance? He has the substance; why engage in eager dispute about the shadow? Is this the dictate of wisdom or fraternal kindness? How do we act in other cases of a similar nature? Some Christians in celebrating the Lord's supper, kneel before an altar, some sit around a table, and others remain in their usual seats, while receiving the sacred memorials of redeeming love: but they all *mean* the same thing, nor ever dream of disputing about the mode. Should I pause before the table of our Lord to contend, that *our* mode is the only or even the best mode in the world, rather than dwell on the delightful associations which cluster around this antepast of heaven; should I secure the approbation of God, warm your hearts with proper emotions, or produce on spectators the most favourable impression? No; I should defeat, rather than promote the holy purposes of this ordinance.

But does God *require* us to contend so earnestly for a particular mode of baptism? Has he set us such an example by *the manner in which he treats this subject?*

Does he in his *providence* show any preference for a particular mode? If any one mode were essential, we should indeed expect him to grant the special tokens of his favour to those who adopt that mode, and withhold such tokens from all other Christians. But does he not apparently approve and bless his people without any regard to the manner in which they may have been baptized? Does he not crown with success their faithful labours for the conversion of men? Does he not visit them with "seasons of refreshing from his presence?" Whatever their mode of baptism, does he not commune with them before his mercy seat, and meet them in his sanctuary, and manifest himself to them at the sacramental board, and cheer them in affliction, and support them in the hour of death, and give them all a cordial welcome to the same mansions of endless, unutterable joy? Why then should we not imitate our heavenly Father in this respect? If he actually treats Christians as if the mode of their baptism were a matter of indifference, why should we attach so high an importance to it, and make it a subject of so much controversy?

Does God in his *Word* treat the form of this ceremony as essential? But where does the Bible tell you that it is essential? It commands you to celebrate the Lord's supper; but does it specify what kind or quantity of bread and wine you must use? It requires you to be baptized; but does it fix the exact quantity of water to be applied? Is its language more specific in one case than in the other? Christ bade his ministers baptize all nations; but did he tell them to sprinkle, or affuse, or immerse all nations?

You appeal, perhaps, to the meaning of *baptize* in the original. But what does that prove? I find that a pond

was *baptized* (tinged) with the blood of a frog ;* that Nebuchadnezzar was *baptized* (wet) with the dew of heaven ;† that various utensils of the temple were *baptized* (sprinkled) with the blood of a small bird ;‡ that the Israelites were all *baptized* (sprinkled by the spray from the water standing on each side of them,) unto Moses in the cloud and the sea ;§ that Judas *baptized* (dipt) his hand in the dish ;|| that the Jews were wont to *baptize* (wash) their hands before every meal, and also their cups, and pots, and brazen vessels, and couches.¶

Now which of all these significations shall I select to designate the *only* mode of baptism ? Because the word means sprinkling, shall I deem this the only mode ? Because it often signifies immersion, shall I presume that to be the only mode ? Because the word *supper* generally means an ordinary meal, shall I conclude that we must, in order to celebrate the Lord's supper, take a full meal ? Why then restrict the word *baptize* to any one of its multifarious significations ? Had Christ commanded his ministers to evangelize all nations, and *apply water* to them in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, could you from such phraseology have inferred with certainty *what* mode of applying water he meant, or that he meant any one mode to the exclusion of all others ? Yet the word *baptize* is in the original nearly as indefinite, and is used to denote almost every possible mode of applying water.

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* Homer :—The word in Italics is in every case some form of the word *baptize* in the original.

† Dan. 5: 21. Sept. Version.

‡ Lev. 14: 6, 51.

§ 1 Cor. 10: 2.

|| Matt. 26: 23. Mark 14: 20. John 13: 26.

¶ Mark 7: 4. Luke 11: 38. Heb. 9: 10.

Whence then do you infer, that the mode of baptism is essential? From the manner in which the Apostles baptized? But how *did* they baptize? The original word, you see, determines nothing. Christ commanded them to baptize; the Bible relates that they did baptize; but does it inform us *how* they applied water in baptism? You may suppose one mode; I may suppose another; but both suppositions may be wrong. I do not ask for conjectures. I wish to know whether the Bible expressly informs us how the Apostles baptized. Does it say that they sprinkled, or affused, or immersed? Then how can I with certainty know in which of these ways they administered baptism? How did they baptize three thousand in a few hours at Jerusalem in the driest season of the year?* By sprinkling? It is possible; but I do not know, because the Bible does not tell me. By affusion? Possible too; but the Bible does not tell me so. By immersion then? Possible also; but the Bible does not say so; and the circumstances of the case render this supposition far less probable than either of the former. How was Cornelius baptized? "In the name of the Lord." But how was water applied? The Bible does not tell us. How was Paul baptized? The Bible does not say. How were the disciples at Ephesus baptized? The Bible merely informs us, that "they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus." How was the jailer baptized? The Bible does not say. Does it tell us how Philip baptized the eunuch? It does indeed say, "they went down both into the water;" but does it expressly inform us how water was applied when they came there? The word itself determines

* Acts 4: 14—41.

nothing; and the phrase, "they went down into the water, and came up *out* of the water," might have been with equal propriety translated, "they went down *to* the water, and came up *from* the water." It is obvious then, that we cannot in a single instance determine with certainty in what way water was applied in baptism by the Apostles.*

Had the mode been essential, we should have expected minute and circumstantial accounts of the precise way in which the Apostles administered baptism. Why then have the sacred writers passed over the whole subject in a manner so slight and cursory? Why have they not in a single instance specified the mode by a minute and exact description? Had the mode of the Lord's supper been left undecided, or even doubtful, would not this uncertainty alone have been a sufficient reason for our adopting whatever mode we might find in our circumstances to be best? Then why not reason thus respecting its kindred ordinance? But even if the manner in which the apostles baptised could in one or more cases be ascertained with absolute certainty, would this determine that mode to be the *only* mode of baptism? Had they, in celebrating the Lord's supper, used unleavened bread in nine cases, and common bread in the tenth, would this have proved the necessity of always using unleavened bread? Would you not have supposed, on the contrary, that they considered the *kind* of bread altogether unessential? Had they in nine cases baptized by sprinkling, but used either affusion or im-

* The following are *all* the examples of Apostolic baptism recorded in the N. T.; but there is nothing said in *any one* of them respecting the precise manner in which water was applied: Acts 2: 38, 41. 8: 12. 12: 13. 8: 38. 9: 16—18. 10: 44—48. 16: 15. 16: 25—34. 18: 8. 19: 5. 1 Cor. 1: 14—16.

mersion in the tenth, could we have inferred, from their example, that sprinkling is the only scriptural mode of baptism?

But will any *allusions* in the New Testament determine with certainty the mode of this ordinance? We read of Christians being "buried with Christ in baptism —buried with him by baptism into death."* But what is the import of such language? Does it mean, that we must be buried in water as Christ was in a sepulchre hewn out of a rock? Must we be buried too, so as to die as he did, with the hope of being restored to life by the power of God? Must we be drowned? You startle at suggestions so absurd; but the language, if you understand it literally, must inevitably mean all this. What then is its *real* meaning? Baptism, you are aware, was only another name for a public profession of Christianity. Paul, in the passages so often quoted, is endeavouring to show his brethren what obligations their profession imposed. These obligaitons he enforces by alluding to the death and resurrection of Christ. He tells them that, as Christ died a natural death for sin, so they should in a moral sense die unto sin; and, as he rose from the dead, so they should rise from spiritual death to a life of new and perfect obedience. They had by their baptism professed thus to be buried with Christ, and promised to rise with him to newness of life. The passage determines nothing in regard to the mode of baptism. The whole is figurative; and, whatever the mode of baptism, the argument means the same thing, and equally answers the purpose of the writer.

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* Romans 6:3—14. Col. 2:12. For a brief but lucid and satisfactory examination of these and other passages on the subject of baptism, I refer with much pleasure to Dr. Woods' excellent Lectures, pp. 154—163.

This part of my subject I have been compelled to treat with extreme brevity. But for my own satisfaction I have carefully examined *all* the passages which even allude to the subject; and the investigation has fully convinced me, that the Bible leaves the mode of baptism even *more* undecided than the mode of the Lord's supper. It is impossible, even in a single instance, to determine with absolute certainty in what way the Apostles applied water in baptism. All the circumstances attending the baptisms administered by them;—the choice of a word so indefinite in its meaning to designate the rite;—the very cursory manner in which the sacred writers uniformly treat the subject; all unite to satisfy me, that God has designedly left his people, in this as well as its kindred ordinance, to adopt whatever mode their circumstances may render expedient. Why then should we not leave the whole subject just where God seems to have left it?

You suppose, however, that Christ must surely have been immersed in Jordan. But is this certain? Does the Bible tell you so? The original word, you see, will not of itself determine how he was baptized. Nor will the fact of his having "come up *out of* the water;" for this phrase might just as correctly have been translated, "he came up *from* the water;" and as the banks of the Jordan were very high, he must of course have gone up a considerable ascent.

How can we be sure, that immersion was John's uniform mode of baptism? True; he did baptize in Enon because there was much water there. But what need of "much water?" For baptism? No; for the Apostles baptized three thousand even at Jerusalem in the driest season of the year. It was however necessary for the accommodation and even subsistence of the vast multi-

tudes that flocked to hear John. Can you infer from such passages, that even he baptized by immersion?* How then do you know that Christ was baptized in this way?

But if you could be absolutely certain, that Christ was immersed, would this alone prove that *you* ought to be immersed? You think you ought "to follow your Saviour down into the water." But could you *know* that he went there himself, would it be certain that you ought to follow him? He does command you to follow him in *some* things; but does he require you to follow him in *all* things? Where has he commanded you to be baptized just as he was baptized? He was circumcised. Ought *you* then to be circumcised? Are you bound, because he did so, to pray all night in a mountain, and fast forty days in a wilderness?

Take a case exactly parallel to the mode of baptism. Before the sacramental supper, Christ washed the feet of his disciples, and then said to them, "I have given you an example, that ye should do as I have done to you."† Here is a plain example. Do you literally imitate it?

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* It seems to me quite immaterial how John applied water in baptism; for I cannot know, however confidently I may suppose, that the apostles baptized in the same way that he had done. Were I to examine the subject, I should first inquire whether the example of John was designed for our imitation. Was his baptism the same with christian baptism? To answer the question, I must ascertain what christian baptism implies, and then see whether John's baptism implies the same. 1. Water must be used. John used it.—2. It must be applied by a christian minister. Was John such a minister—a minister of the Christian dispensation before that dispensation was introduced by Christ whose harbinger he was? Could he be so any more than Isaiah or Moses?—3. Water must be applied in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. Did John baptize thus? Was Christ baptized in his own name?—4. If John's baptism had been christian baptism, would the Apostles have rebaptized his disciples? They did so; and this fact alone is sufficient to shew us how they regarded the baptism of John. Acts 19: 1—5.

† John 13: 12—15.

The command too is positive and unequivocal. But are you bound to obey it literally? You know that Christ in celebrating the supper, took unleavened bread, and reclined on a couch spread upon the floor to partake of the sacramental emblems; and he expressly commanded his followers to do the same in remembrance of him. How then do you dispose of an example so plain, a command so positive? You obey not the letter, but the spirit; you change the mode, while you retain the thing.

Let us, then, be consistent. Let us follow our Saviour alike in both ordinances. If we imitate him literally in one case, let us imitate him literally in the other; if we deem it sufficient in one case to catch the spirit of his example, let us deem it sufficient in the other; and either cease altogether from controversy about the mode of baptism, or demonstrate the absurdity of such disputes by contending with equal zeal for the mode of the Lord's supper. The mode of the latter is fixed in the Bible with far more certainty than the mode of the former. If we may change the mode of one ordinance, may we not for similar reasons, vary the mode of the other? Why should we follow our Saviour in baptism any more than in the Lord's supper? If we are bound in one case, we are equally, and even more so, in the other. If you insist on being baptized just as you *suppose* Christ was baptized, why do you not carry your principle through, and celebrate the sacramental supper just as you *certainly know* he did? The mode of the latter is quite as essential as the mode of baptism. Why then do you not contend about the mode of the Lord's supper, and make it a wall of conscientious separation among brethren? Why are Christians all asleep on a subject so momentous, and so essential to the prosperity of vital

religion? But if your conscience is at ease in one case, why should it not be in the other? If you are even bound in your circumstances to celebrate the sacramental supper in a manner different from your Saviour, may I not be left at liberty, and also feel it my duty, to receive baptism in that way which seems best adapted to my circumstances?

In view of such considerations, I cannot see why this subject should be permitted, especially in revivals of religion, to occupy so great a share of attention. If the Bible has not expressly enjoined any one mode of baptism to the exclusion of all others; if God treats his people without any apparent regard to the manner in which they may have been baptized; if all Christians conscientiously practise baptism; if the ordinance in whatever way administered means the same thing, and accomplishes the same purposes; what motive should induce me to agitate a controversy so unimportant? Does the gospel furnish no theme more congenial to my heart, and no object more worthy of my zeal? In the mere form of a ceremony, the veriest shade of a shadow, can I find a power more spirit-stirring than all the high and holy motives that animated the saints of better days? Can I justify my zeal by pleading the utility of disputes among brethren respecting the mode of baptism?

III. But this controversy, so far from doing any good, is a source of much evil. I appeal to facts on this point; and I ask, whether it has not actually exerted a bad influence on the disputants themselves—on men of the world—on the brotherhood of saints—and on the general interests of religion?

What then is the actual influence of this controversy on the disputant himself? Does it not shrivel his

mind by bringing it down from the high themes of the gospel to the bare form of a ceremony? Does it not engender a ceremonial spirit that tends to mar his graces, to quench the ardor of his zeal for vital godliness, to alienate his heart from his brethren in Christ, and paralizé the noblest energies of his soul?

How ill does such a spirit accord with the genius of christianity! Was it a characteristic of Christ and his Apostles to insist on matters of indifference? Look at their example.* Mark especially how Paul expostulates with those members of the primitive church who contended with excessive zeal for forms and ceremonies. How earnestly does he dissuade them from insisting so strenuously on points so unessential! How wisely does he exhort "every man to be fully persuaded in his own mind;" and urge all "to follow after the things which make for peace, and things wherewith one may edify another!"

How poorly, too, does this controversy harmonize with the noble spirit of the age! When I see the convert disposed in the first kindlings of piety to spread the arms of his affection so wide as to embrace all who breathe the spirit of Christ; while my heart is cheered with the assurance, that all the followers of Jesus are fast coming to hold christian fellowship with each other; when I hear, that missionaries of every name meet in heathen lands around the same table to commemorate the dying love of their common Lord; when I observe different denominations beginning to unite in plans of general benevolence, and think of a consummation so devoutly to be wished as the union of all who love the Lord Jesus in one mighty phalanx to bear the standard of his cross in

* Acts 15: 1—29. Rom. 14: 1—23. 15: 1—7.

triumph over the world; can I shut my bosom to this expansive spirit of the age, and turn from these high and cheering contemplations to dispute with my brethren about the mere mode of baptism? Tell it not in Gath; publish it not in the streets of Askelon.

For what must be its influence on men of the world? Does it produce on their minds no impression unfavourable to our character, and to the claims of our religion? Alas! in what an attitude does it exhibit the brotherhood of saints to their view! I blush, when I think how richly we have merited their disrespect; and I could weep, when I remember how deeply this strife among brethren has often stabbed the very vitals of their common cause.

How unhappily, then, must it affect Christians themselves! How often has it soured and alienated their feelings! How often has it sown seeds of permanent discord, and planted roots of lasting bitterness!

Then look at the inevitable effects of this controversy on the general interests of religion. It has preyed on her vitals. How often has it retarded her progress, and cut the very sinews of her prosperity! How frequently has it nipt and withered the convert's budding graces! How often effaced religious impressions from the minds of inquirers after the way of salvation! How frequently checked and even destroyed the most promising revivals of religion! These are facts; they are known to be facts; and often have I heard the best ministers of Christ weep over them.* Had the zeal and the talents, so unwise-

* "We must all, I think, be satisfied, that the salvation of sinners, and the spiritual prosperity of Christ's kingdom, together with our own sanctification and eternal life, ought to be the great objects of desire and pursuit to all Christians; that no other objects should be suffered to come into competition with these; and that we should do nothing, and countenance nothing, which can in

ly wasted in worse than useless disputes about the mode of baptism, been exerted in promoting the salvation of men, how much might have been done to repel the attacks of a common foe, to repair the waste places of Zion, and to send the blessings of the gospel as widely as the ruins of the fall have spread.

I appeal to those who can speak from personal knowledge. I ask the Christian. Has this controversy—not baptism itself, but controversy about the mode—warmed your heart with love to God, and fraternal affection for all of every name who bear the image of your Lord? Has it filled your bosom with deeper compassion for a perishing world, and prompted you to pray more earnest-

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any way interfere with them. But have these great, spiritual interests been always kept uppermost in the mind? I have heard of Christians, and of Gospel ministers, who have made the *mode* of *Baptism* their grand, engrossing subject. I have heard of those, who have been actuated by such an intense zeal in favour of one particular form of this external rite, that they have seemed almost inclined to make it the sum of all religion. Even in those auspicious seasons, when God is pleased in mercy to pour out his Spirit, and produce in the minds of multitudes a deep and overwhelming impression of the evil of sin, and the value of eternal salvation; there are some Christians, and some teachers of religion, (I hope the number will be found small,) who show an unaccountable forwardness to introduce discussions respecting the *mode of Baptism;* and instead of striving with all their hearts to bring sinners into the kingdom of heaven, and to promote the holiness of believers, make it a favourite object to convince them, that Baptism should not be administered by sprinkling, but by immersion. Now it is well known, that discussions of this kind have a direct tendency to grieve the Holy Spirit, and to divert the attention of saints and sinners from the one thing needful. I am fully persuaded, that the introduction of such a subject, especially in a revival of religion, is offensive to God, and will be followed, as it often has been, by the withdrawment of his gracious influence. And I would earnestly beseech any ministers or Christians, who are inclined to such a course as that to which I have now referred, to pause a few moments, and seriously to inquire, whether they are pursuing the great object, for which Jesus died on the cross, and for which he has given the Gospel, and the day of salvation; whether they are not in danger of substituting an excessive zeal for an outward rite, or rather, the *form* of an outward rite, in the place of pure love to Christ, and to the immortal souls of men; and whether they have any reason to think, that such a *form* as this, will appear as important to them at the Judgement day, as it does now." *Dr. Woods' Lectures.*

ly, and to labour more strenuously for their salvation? I appeal to the recent convert. Has it promoted your growth in grace, invigorated your hopes, or sweetened your joys? I ask the inquirer. Has it led you to the Saviour, or given you a juster sense of your guilt and danger? What sinner has it converted? What saint has it strengthened for his spiritual warfare? What interests of vital godliness has it promoted?

What apology, then, can I have for agitating such a controversy? My conscience? What! conscientious in opening such a flood gate of evils upon Zion—in throwing such a fire brand of jealousy and strife into her very citadel! Can I really suppose it to be the will of God, that I should do what tends to produce so much evil, to tarnish the honour of his cause, and ruin the souls of men forever? All this too for the mere form of a ceremony? Is such the purpose of my office, or of your own high calling? Shall we stoop from the themes of the gospel, worthy of angels and of God, to dwell perpetually on the bare form of a ceremony? God save us from such a ceremonial spirit. It would be a deadly gangrene preying on the vitals of our piety. Do you then wish me to turn my inquiry-room into a school of catechetical instruction, and my whole parish into an arena of ceaseless controversy respecting the mere mode of baptism? Is this the example of my Saviour? Would he, if now on earth, make the form of a ceremony a principal subject of his preaching and his conversation? Was this the spirit of Paul? This the course pursued by those master spirits of the church who have turned the greatest number to righteousness? No; they have set a worthier example. I would imitate it, and bid farewell forever to this profitless controversy. A nobler cause

demands all my time and strength. An object for which prophets lived, and apostles toiled, and martyrs bled; an object for which the Son of God came from the throne of the universe to the manger and the cross; an object which occupies all heaven, and involves the eternal destinies of a world—I cannot stoop from an elevation so lofty to dispute about such a shade of a shadow as the form of a ceremony.

No; I will plead only for peace. I would leave every Christian to choose his own mode of baptism; nor would I breathe a whisper to disturb the quiet and happy repose of his conscience. Were we baptized in different ways? Be it so; but are we not brethren still, and bound to "walk together as heirs of the grace of life?" Yes; we *are* brethren by a thousand tender ties. We worship one God; we trust in the same Saviour; we are sanctified by the same Spirit; we have alike consecrated ourselves by one baptism to the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost; we are enlisted in the service of a common Master; we have access to the same throne of grace; we are cheered in our pilgrimage of sorrow by the same promises; and we both hope, when flesh and heart shall fail us, to pillow our dying head on the same bosom of almighty love, and be borne on angel-wings to those mansions which the Redeemer has gone to prepare for all them that love him. Go then, disciple of Jesus, be baptized as thou wilt, I must claim thee as my brother still. Go where thou thinkest thy Saviour calls thee, and a brother's heart shall go with thee, a brother's prayers follow thee; and whether we meet or not around the table of our Lord on earth, we will still hope to meet in heaven, and there spend an eternity in perfect union and bliss.

Shall I, then, dwell on such a bone of contention as the bare form of a ceremony? No; I have higher and nobler and more urgent themes. So, my brethren, have you. There is a world for whose salvation you ought to toil. There is a Master in heaven for you to serve. You have each a soul to save, and a heaven to win. There is before you an eternity of joy or woe to engross all your feelings and all your powers. These are the mighty themes that now demand your attention. If, forgetful of these, you have in a single instance begun to dispute respecting a mere mode, I entreat you to cease from sowing discord among brethren. If others think proper to make this a principal topic of conversation with you, I do hope that *you* will feel constrained by higher motives than the mere form of a ceremony to dissuade them from such a subject, and urge them to dwell on the nobler themes of your common Christianity. Have you for a time turned away from these themes? Then must you quickly return, or God will soon manifest his displeasure by withholding from you the special influences of his Spirit. Your Saviour requires your immediate return; the Spirit waits for it; the welfare of Zion demands; the wants of a perishing world plead for it; eternities of joy or woe, suspended on your instrumentality, call upon you with a voice of seven thunders to engage with greater zeal than ever in promoting the salvation of those around you. In view of such considerations, I ask before the heart searching God, what will you do? Go to your closets, and there pray, and meditate, and strive to imbue your souls with the spirit of Christ, until you are prepared to act as you will wish you had done when the visions of eternity shall burst on your dying eye; when you shall meet your now impenitent

friends before the tribunal of your Judge; and when in heaven, forgetting the shibboleths of earth, you shall join your brethren from every church and clime in everlasting hallelujahs to him who died to redeem us all by his own blood.